

Police Research Series
Paper 99

Sex offending against children: Understanding the risk

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First Published 1998

Policing and Reducing Crime Unit: Police Research Series

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ISBN 1-84082-204-X

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Foreword

Sex offending against children is featured in the media with increasing frequency. In some cases this has led to increased pressure on the police and other agencies to protect communities from sex offenders in their areas. Yet, as this report shows, this is not a problem that can be dealt with by 'scapegoating' a few individuals. Instead, there is a need for informed inter-agency work that both protects children and deters offenders.

This report makes an important contribution to developing knowledge in this area, with its assessment of the scale of the problem and description of offending patterns. It should help the police and others not only to target appropriate resources to tackle the problem but also to rebut widely held myths and assumptions about offenders who sexually abuse children.

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December 1998*

Acknowledgements

Someone once said that when you steal from one source that's plagiarism, but when you steal from twenty that's research. It must therefore be said that this report is research on a grand scale.

First, it involved a systematic review of the literature in relation to sex offending against children, of which Helen McElroy provided immense support and input without which this project could never have been completed.

Then I relied on the expert guidance and generous nature of a number of eminent, experienced and reliable academics and clinicians to steer me down the right path. In particular, I must thank Richard Beckett from the Oxford Forensic Psychology Service, Dr Roderick Broadhurst from the University of Hong Kong, Dr Karl Hanson from the Department of the Solicitor General of Canada, Dr Stephen Hudson from the University of Canterbury (New Zealand), Dr Richard Laws from the Victoria Forensic Psychiatry Services (British Columbia), Dr Janice Marques from the California Department of Mental Health, Dr Bill Marshall from Queen's University (Kingston, Ontario), Dr Bill Murphy from the University of Tennessee, Dr Robert Prentky from the Justice Resource Institute at the Massachusetts Treatment Centre, and Dr David Thornton from HM Prison Service.

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PRCU would like to thank Richard Beckett, Consultant Forensic and Clinical Psychologist, Fair Mile Hospital for acting as external reviewer for this publication.

Executive summary

This report reviews the literature relating to sex offending against children. It is aimed at the UK police service, and focuses on those studies that have most relevance to police officers in their interaction with individuals who sexually offend against children. It covers three broad areas: the extent and nature of child sexual abuse, the characteristics of offenders, and the risks posed by them, and the ways in which those risks can be managed.

It is well known that official statistics of sex offence convictions underestimate greatly the annual incidence of sex offences committed against children. A number of approaches to address this problem are described. These produce a wide range of estimates, with police crime reports giving the highest rates, albeit with a number of caveats. It is concluded that **records kept by individual forces, if systematically examined, would provide valuable information about the true incidence of child sexual abuse, as well as regional variations in it** .

The offenders themselves are a heterogeneous group of individuals. The literature suggests that **60 to 70% of child molesters target only girls, about 20 to 33% boys, and about 10% children of either sex** . The majority of perpetrators sexually assault children known to them, with about 80% of offences taking place in the home of either the offender or victim. Overall, it is estimated that in only about 25 to 40% of offenders is there a recurrent and intense sexual attraction to children that would attract a label of “paedophilia”. There is controversy about the extent to which sex offenders against children have other sexually deviant interests, but there is almost certainly a small group of highly deviant men who have a repertoire of other types of sexual crime.

Sex offenders against children have a rate of nonsexual criminal convictions only slightly greater than men in the population in general . It has often been suggested that men who sexually offend against children are in some way socially deficient, but it may be that more subtle difficulties relating to an inability to form intimate relationships with adults are an important driving factor.

Adolescent sex offenders probably account for up to a third of all sex crime . Although many will offend against children, this is often secondary to the fact that the ages of their victims will be similar to their own – their sexual interests are “age appropriate”, and only a proportion who target younger victims appear to have a sexual interest in children *per se*. It is adolescents in this latter group who best fit the description of “sex offenders against children”. Overall, adolescent sex offenders appear to be as heterogeneous as their adult counterparts, and the types of behaviour they carry out are similar. The sex offending of many adult offenders can

be traced to their adolescence, but only a small minority of adolescent sex offenders continues to sexually offend as adults.

Less than 5% of sex offences against children are known to have been committed by women, often in association with men, but population surveys suggest higher rates of offending by females. The damage caused by female abusers appears to be similar to that caused by males. It remains the case, however, that male abusers represent a much larger problem, and it is argued that it is hard to justify a shift of emphasis and resources towards female sex offenders.

Networks of sex offenders against children have also attracted much interest, but there has been little written about them in either the research or academic literature. Networks may form within institutions, within extended families, or amongst groups of paedophiles. **The vast majority of sex offenders against children, however, typically act alone.**

The link between being a victim of sexual abuse as a child and becoming a child molester as an adult remains controversial. Offenders who target male victims or victims of both sexes are more likely to have a history of sexual abuse than are those who target females only, and those who are abused at a younger age appear to start offending earlier. A history of sexual abuse, however, is generally associated with other significant adverse experiences in childhood that are difficult to disentangle from each other. **What is clear is that a history of sexual abuse as a child is neither necessary nor sufficient to lead to adult sexual offending**.

About 20% of those who are convicted of sexual offences against children are reconvicted for similar offences; this is much lower than recidivism rates for offenders generally. Although it is known that reoffences often do not lead to reconvictions, it is argued that it is too soon to conclude that the true reoffending rate is substantially greater than 20%. However, there are subgroups of offenders in whom reoffending rates are substantially higher, and it is the task of risk assessment instruments to identify the members of these groups.

Two risk assessment scales are reviewed in detail – the Rapid Risk Assessment for Sex Offence Recidivism (RRASOR) developed in Canada, and the Structured Anchored Clinical Judgement (SACJ) scale developed as part of the HM Prison Service Sex Offender Treatment Programme. Both make use of information readily available to the police. In an evaluation of RRASOR it was found that the scale identified 20% of a cohort of sex offenders as high risk: in this group recidivism was 25 to 50%, compared with a recidivism rate of under 15% in the

remainder of the sample. The SACJ also successfully identified a high risk group, of whom nearly half reoffended compared with a recidivism rate of under 10% in the lowest risk group.

While treatment programmes are able to reduce sex offence recidivism, the results are modest, and **multi-agency management strategies will be necessary to reduce the risks of reoffending by known sex offenders**. Some will reoffend regardless, and a goal of harm reduction rather than absolute prevention needs to be recognised. If the broader issue of the sexual abuse of children is to be fully addressed, however, attention will need to be given to primary prevention. We need to understand the causes of sex offending and intervene before offending takes place or escalates, and in so doing prevent the creation of new victims.

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1. Introduction

Victim surveys from a number of countries have shown that the sexual abuse of children is not uncommon. This suggests, of course, that there must also be a relatively large number of sex offenders in these countries. In the UK this is supported by research recently published by the Home Office which found that in 1993 over 100,000 individuals in the population had convictions for sexual offences against children (P. Marshall, 1997). Findings such as this, which highlight the potential size of the problem of child sexual abuse, raise difficult issues in relation to the most appropriate ways in which sex offenders should be managed by the criminal justice system in terms of policing strategies, disposal options, and supervision.

Increasing awareness of the risks posed by sex offenders and the lack of established and coherent strategies with which to deal with them led to a number of significant initiatives in the 1990s. In 1991, for example, the English Prison Service replaced the disparate, variable quality and unproven sex offender programmes typically found in the prisons with the national prison Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP). This is a tightly structured, rigorously monitored programme in which assessment and treatment procedures are based on principles whose effectiveness has been demonstrated (Grubin and Thornton, 1994). Similarly, most (but not all) probation services now have dedicated teams to deal with sex offenders in preference to field officers with no specific training as was previously common (Barker, 1991; Proctor & Flaxington, 1996).

New legislation has also been introduced, in particular the Criminal Justice Act 1991 which extends the period sex offenders spend on licence after release from prison, and the creation of a register of sex offenders to be maintained by the police in the Sex Offenders Act 1997. Further measures are being taken in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 which will provide for extended periods of post-release supervision for sex offenders and introduce sex offender orders which will help the police manage sex offenders in the community.

One consequence of these various initiatives has been to highlight the need for co-operation between agencies if the risk to children posed by sex offenders is to be effectively controlled and contained. Although different agencies have their own priorities, regardless of their backgrounds, those dealing with sex offenders need to share a similar knowledge base about the nature of sex offending against children if they are to develop appropriate management strategies.

This report is aimed at the UK police service, and is intended to review those studies that have most relevance to police officers in their interaction with

individuals who sexually offend against children. It covers three broad areas:

- the extent and nature of child sexual abuse;
- the characteristics of offenders and the risks posed by them; and,
- ways in which that risk can be managed.

This review is based primarily on published studies and more general literature reviews in relation to sex offences against children; however work in this area can be slow to come to press (and sometimes is not easily distilled into print at all). Because of this fact, a number of individuals who are eminent and active either in the treatment of sex offenders or in research into sex offending have been consulted on matters of fact, opinion and interpretation – these individuals are acknowledged in the opening of this report.

The review is divided into a number of sections that deal with different aspects of sexual offending against children. All relate to the three broad areas listed above. The final section brings the conclusions of these sections together in a brief exploration of their implications for policing, and for public policy.

Structure of the report

The next section examines what is known about the numbers of offenders and victims in the UK and other countries and what has been established by incidence and prevalence studies. In addition, information on reported crimes has also been collected from a sample of police forces. Section three describes what we know about offenders including where they offend, their gender and previous offending history. Section four describes what we know about re-offending and tools which can be used to predict re-offending. The remaining sections examine the consequences of knowledge about sex offending and sex offenders for the police, and other agencies who deal with sex offenders and their victims.

2. Numbers of offenders and victims

It is well known that official statistics relating to sex offence convictions provide a misleading impression of the prevalence of sexual offending against all types of victims. Much sex offending goes unreported, when it does get reported charges are not infrequently withdrawn, or there may be insufficient evidence to proceed to trial. When a case does get to court, convictions for lesser charges may be necessary because of evidential considerations, or be accepted following an agreement by the defendant to plead guilty to other charges. In terms of offences against children, the situation is further complicated by the failure of official statistics to differentiate the age of the victim in relation to many sexual offences. Thus, officially recorded sex offences against children both underestimate the incidence of this type of crime, and may bear only a limited relationship to the actual nature of the assault itself.

Recorded offences of sexual abuse against children

In terms of official statistics, the indecent assault of females under 16 is by far the most common sexual offence involving children. In these cases an offender is formally dealt with either through a caution or a conviction: in 1995 this offence resulted in 2,116 cautions or convictions, representing about 50% of all sexual offences recorded against children. The next most common offences are unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 16, indecent assault on a male under 16, gross indecency with a girl under 14, unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 13, rape of a girl under 16, and gross indecency with a boy under 14. The number of cautions or convictions for each of these offences is listed in Table 1. Other offences, such as buggery of a male under 16, attempted rape of a female under 16, and incest, result in only a small number of cautions or convictions annually. Overall, the seven main offences referred to above were responsible for 3,648 (92%) of the 3,957 officially recorded cautions or convictions for sexual offences against children in 1995.

NUMBERS OF OFFENDERS AND VICTIMS

Table 1: Number of convictions or cautions in England and Wales for the six most common sexual offences against children in 1985 and 1995¹

	1985	1995	% change
Indecent assault on female < 16	2,416	2,116	-12%
Unlawful sexual intercourse with girl < 16	1,550	603	-61%
Indecent assault on male < 16	674	476	-29%
Gross indecency with girls 14 or under	206	129	-37%
Unlawful sexual intercourse with girl < 13	168	122	-27%
Gross indecency with boy 14 or under	122	84	-31%
Total	5136	3530	-31%

¹ This excludes rape of girls under 16, for which there were 118 cautions or convictions in 1995 but no comparable figures for 1985 when this offence was not separately recorded.

Source: Home Office (1997)

Sexual offences tend to attract a good deal of media attention, but contrary to what is often believed to be the case, the number of cautions or convictions for sexual offences against children has been declining steadily in recent years. Table 1 shows that between 1985 and 1995 there has been a marked reduction in relation to the most common offences. This could be attributed to the fact that the age of child victims is now being recorded less often and so the true figure is even more masked than it was previously. Alternative explanations are that cases could be being dealt with in ways other than prosecution, the criteria determining when to prosecute have hardened, or there is a real decrease in sex offending against children.

There are only two exceptions to this decline in recorded sexual offences against children. The first relates to *notifications* of offences of gross indecency with children 14 and under of either sex, which in contrast with the reduction in *cautions* or *convictions* for this offence, more than doubled from 633 to 1,287 over the 10 year period². Further research would be necessary to determine the reason for this increase in notifications of gross indecency, particularly as there was a decline in the two other notifiable sexual offences against children (unlawful sexual intercourse with girls under 16 and unlawful sexual intercourse with girls under 13). The second exception related to the taking, distributing or publishing indecent photographs of children, for which convictions increased from 25 in 1985 to 62 in 1995.

² Gross indecency relates to behaviour that is against public propriety but does not amount to an assault, such as a man getting a child to touch him sexually.

Offences recorded by the police

As mentioned above, because the ages of victims are not always made clear, it is not possible to determine accurately the numbers of sexual offences against children that result in cautions, prosecutions or convictions from official publications, such as *Criminal Statistics for England and Wales*. However, an appendix to *Criminal Statistics* in 1989 indicated that in the area covered by the Metropolitan Police Service, one third of offences of indecent assault, two thirds of offences of buggery, and over 80% of indecent assaults on males involved victims under 16.

Individual police forces, however, do record information about the age of sexual offence victims, although this is not centrally analysed, or even routinely collated, beyond force level. In order to understand further the pattern of sexual offences against children, therefore, we carried out a small survey of offences recorded by the police between 1994 and 1997 in five forces chosen for their disparity: Gwent, Lancashire, Merseyside, the Metropolitan Police, and Northumbria. For a variety of reasons there was some inconsistency in the data collected, with not all forces able to provide information for all of these years and one force including victims up to the age of 18, but it was still possible to analyse the data effectively.

As described above, in 1995 there were 3,957 offenders throughout England and Wales cautioned or convicted for sexual offences against children. In 1996, for the five police force areas we surveyed alone, there were 4,369 recorded sexual offences against children (although in some cases a single individual may have been responsible for a number of offences against the same victim). Not all of these offences resulted in cautions or convictions, but data from one of the forces suggest that in at least 80% of cases the identity of the alleged perpetrator may have been known to the police.

In terms of changes over time, one force illustrated an upward trend over the four year period, one a downward trend, and the others showed no consistent pattern. While such a brief period is insufficient to identify genuine changes in the incidence of sexual crime, these differences do suggest that national figures may obscure what is happening on a regional basis. In other words, official statistics not only underestimate greatly the number of sexual offences against children; they also have the potential to mislead in terms of patterns of sexual crime.

In all five force areas and in all years, indecent assault was the main charge used in sexual offences against children, accounting for between 62 and 73% of all offences, a slightly higher proportion than for actual cautions and convictions. In those cases that included a breakdown of the sex of the victim, between 14 and

24% of indecent assault offences involved male victims. Rape accounted for between seven and 16% of recorded offences, again higher than for cautions and convictions, with between four and 11% of cases involving male victims. Although notifiable, gross indecency with a child appears to be reported infrequently, making up less than 10% of sex offences against children in forces for which we had the information.

As with our own survey, a Home Office survey of 28 police forces in relation to recorded sexual offences between 1990 and 1994 also provided a very different perspective from that of published statistics (summarised in Home Office, 1997). In contrast with the relatively low number of offenders cautioned or convicted for rape of a girl under 16, girls under this age represented on average 26% of all female alleged victims of rape recorded by these police forces. Furthermore, girls between the ages of 10 and 15 were at the highest risk of all females of being the reported victims of rape, with a rate of 59 cases per 100,000 girls in that age range. This compares with a rate of 58 cases per 100,000 for the next highest age band (16 to 24), and a rate of about 18 per 100,000 for females of all ages.

One must be cautious in interpreting these rape figures, however, as by definition girls under 16 cannot consent to sexual intercourse, and thus all intercourse with a girl less than this age is by definition rape. However, offenders may be charged with another offence such as 'unlawful sexual intercourse'. Furthermore, the vast majority of these alleged rape offences against girls involved males well known to them, in situations where the perpetrator was in a position of power or responsibility over them because of their relationship, and were often part of a longer pattern of sexual abuse. It is likely that many of these cases will have resulted in convictions for other offences if and when they reached court. Thus, although some cases will be similar in nature, rape involving girls under 16 is on the whole likely to be a different phenomenon from rape offences against adult women.

In terms of indecent assault (including buggery), the Home Office survey again found that being a child puts one at increased risk. In the case of females, 51% of cases of indecent assault recorded by the 28 police forces involved a girl under 16 (with 17% under 10 years of age), while in the case of males, 70% were under this age (with 27% under 10). For both females and males, the ages between 10 and 15 were by far the greatest period of risk for being indecently assaulted. 327 per 100,000 females in this age group were reported as victims of indecent assault (about two and a half times the next highest age group of 16 to 24). There were 66 per 100,000 males (just over two and a half times the next highest group, which in the case of males is from zero to nine – recorded indecent assaults against males over 15 are rare).

Combining the figures for rape and indecent assault in these 28 force areas, and assuming that individual victims were not counted twice, based on the Home Office survey, at least 0.5% of females under 16 are the victims of indecent assault or rape each year, as are at least 0.09% of males under 16.

In terms of the extreme end of the spectrum – the sexual killing of children – the CATCHEM database maintained by Derbyshire Police is a comprehensive record of all British cases. The annual number of child sex killings is extremely low, about five per year, and has changed little over the last 30 years (C. Burton, personal communication; see also Aitken et al., 1995).

Population surveys

Even when brought to the attention of the police, alleged sexual abuse of a child may not be recorded as a crime, particularly where there is a lack of corroborating evidence (Browne, 1994). It is sometimes suggested that the best way to determine prevalence rates of child sexual abuse is therefore through community surveys. In general, however, these tend to produce a wide spread of results in terms of the numbers of individuals who report that they have been sexually abused as children. North American estimates in the 1980s, for example, ranged from six to 60% of adult females and three to 30% of adult males reporting sexual abuse when young (Finkelhor et al., 1986). In a more recent review of surveys carried out in 21 countries, including Great Britain, Finkelhor (1994) found that seven to 36% of adult women, and three to 29% of adult men, reported being sexually abused as children.

The difficulty with these surveys, and the most likely reasons for the wide variations in prevalence rates reported between them relates to a number of factors. These include the way in which information is collected (e.g. postal surveys, brief assessments or in-depth interviews), differing refusal rates (Haugaard (1987), for example, found that studies with low participation rates tended to produce higher reports of abuse), and different definitions of sexual abuse. In a South African study reported by Finkelhor (1994), for instance, high rates of abuse for men were found, but only one third of these abusive experiences actually involved physical contact. In addition, surveys have involved different base populations, and in most cases it is unclear how representative of the general population the various samples have been.

In spite of this variation in results, interesting consistencies nonetheless emerge from the survey reports that are probably an accurate reflection of underlying patterns. In particular, most studies find that the rate of sexual abuse of female

children is higher than for males, ranging between a factor of 1.5 to 5, and that intrafamilial abuse is more common for girls than for boys (representing up to a half of the abuse experienced by girls). In addition, most (at least 90%) of the abuse suffered by women when they were children is reported to have been perpetrated by males, while the proportion of boys abused by males varies much more between studies.

Another notable feature of these surveys is the relatively low rate of disclosure when this is asked about. In the studies described by Finkelhor (1994), for example, in general only about one half of the victims said that they had disclosed their experiences of abuse to anyone.

With increased awareness and media interest in child sexual abuse, has come an increase in the number of reported cases, although as mentioned above, not convictions, at least in the UK. What has not been clear is whether this increase represents a real rise in the incidence of child sexual abuse, and there continues to be controversy about this. Leventhal, (1988), for example, argued that modern studies suggest increased levels, but Feldman et al. (1991), (who has made probably the best attempt to address this question in respect of North America), concluded otherwise. They compared rates in a number of North American studies published in the 1980s with those reported in the major study of sexual behaviour in American females carried out by Kinsey and colleagues in the 1940s. They found that in spite of increased rates of reporting, overall prevalence rates of child sexual abuse appeared to be similar in the 1980s to those described by Kinsey 40 years earlier.

Although approached from a different angle, that of the offender, the question of changes in incidence in England and Wales was addressed by P. Marshall (1997). He looked at cohorts of men born in 1953, 1958, 1963, 1968, and 1973, with a follow up period to 1993. If anything, the proportion of men in each cohort convicted of a sexual offence against a child appears to have declined. In overall terms, about 0.55% of the 1958 and 1953 cohorts had such a conviction by the time they were 30 compared with 0.45% of the 1963 cohort, while the younger two cohorts seem to be gathering sex offence convictions at an even slower rate.

Focusing on general prevalence in the UK, Baker and Duncan (1985), in collaboration with MORI (an organisation perhaps better known for its surveys of voter intentions), carried out one of the first, and probably still the best, attempts to estimate the national prevalence of child sexual abuse in the general population in a study commissioned by Channel 4 Television. Over 2,000 individuals were surveyed, of whom 12% of females and 8% of males reported that they had been

sexually abused before the age of 16, although this included non-contact abuse such as exposure of sexual organs, showing pornographic material, or “talking about sexual things in an erotic way”. The average age at which females said they were first abused (10.7) was significantly lower than for males (12.0), while about half the abusers were known to the victims, with 14% of the abuse incestuous in nature.

Based on these findings, Baker and Duncan (1985) estimated that over 4.5 million adults had been sexually abused as children, and they suggested that over 1.1 million children in the general population will be abused by the age of 15, although they do not state over what time period. It should be noted, however, that in this study about two thirds of the reported abuse related to a single experience, and half of the reported incidents involved no physical contact, with the majority of such cases thought likely to have involved a stranger indecently exposing himself. Nevertheless, Baker and Duncan noted that the experience was usually perceived by the victim as abusive in nature.

Various other UK surveys have been carried out, but not on a general population sample as in the Baker and Duncan study. In 1992, for example, the Department of Health estimated from the numbers of children on Child Protection Registers in respect of sexual abuse that the incidence of sexual abuse in the UK was 0.6 per 1,000 girls and 0.2 per 1,000 boys (quoted in Rogers and Roberts, 1995). While placement on the “at risk” register does not require a conviction, it will still miss the large number of non-disclosed or undetected cases of abuse; on the other hand, many of the cases on the registers relate to *risk* of abuse rather than substantiated sexual victimisation. Bickerton et al. (1991) interviewed women attending a Well Woman clinic in Clwyd and found that 3.5% reported abuse in childhood (of which 75% was “moderate”, “serious” or “very serious” in nature), but this is clearly an unrepresentative sample. Similarly, Kelly et al. (1991), in a study of polytechnic students, estimated that sexual abuse in the form of penetration or forced masturbation was experienced by 4% of girls and 2% of boys, again an unrepresentative group of individuals.

Mackenzie et al. (1993), using information from a number of different agencies involved in child protection, estimated the incidence of child sexual abuse in Northern Ireland in 1987 to be 0.9 per 1,000 children (0.34 for boys and 1.49 for girls) based on established cases. This increased to 1.16 per 1,000 (0.46 for boys and 1.91 for girls) when suspected cases were included in the calculations, the majority of which involved physical contact.

It is interesting to compare these latter figures with the number of referrals for child sexual abuse in Cleveland in 1987, when the rate was 3.44 per 1,000 children (Butler-Sloss, 1987), significantly higher than the Northern Ireland rate. Mackenzie et al. (1993) observed that although in that year the number of children under the age of 16 in Northern Ireland was 3.4 times that of Cleveland, in Cleveland there were 56 more referrals than the number of established cases in Northern Ireland. Thus, estimations of national rates of childhood sexual abuse based on local samples will vary widely depending on the extent to which a particular local sample is representative of the whole.

Little work has been directed towards the issue of child sexual abuse in ethnic minorities. However, Moghal et al. (1995) working in Leeds calculated that the annual referral rate of definite or probable cases involving the Asian community was one quarter that of non-Asians, although the age distribution and gender ratio was similar in those who were referred. They believed that the Asian cases they saw were more severe, and “probably represent the tip of a larger iceberg”. Interestingly, a large American national prevalence study (Cappelleri et al., 1993) reported similar findings. They found that while White and Black ethnic groups had rates of childhood sexual abuse similar to each other (about 2 per 1,000 children), the category “other” ethnic group, which included Asians within it, had a significantly lower rate (0.87 per 1,000).

Another way in which to approach the question of numbers of victims of child sexual abuse is through information obtained from sex offenders themselves. For example, Weinrott and Saylor (1991), in a computer administered interview given to 67 child molesters who had been classified as “sexual psychopaths” (i.e. sex offenders thought to be particularly deviant and dangerous). They found that while official records indicated they had offended against 136 different victims, the men themselves admitted to offences against 959 different children. But perhaps the most frequently quoted of this type of study was one carried out by Abel et al. (1987) in the United States. In this study 224 non-incestuous child molesters claimed over 5,000 acts against 4,435 *female* victims and 153 non-incestuous child molesters claimed over 43,000 acts against nearly 23,000 *male* victims; large numbers of incestuous acts and victims were also reported.

It is not clear, however, how representative the samples described in these studies are: Weinrott and Saylor (1991), for instance, looked at offenders classified as sexual psychopaths, while in the Abel et al. study above, many of the subjects had replied to advertisements in the press. Indeed, it is hard to believe that this group is characteristic of sex offenders generally. If the level of sexual offending reported by Abel et al. was typical of offenders in England and Wales, then the 110,000 men in

the 1993 population who had a conviction for a sexual offence against a child (P. Marshall, 1997) could potentially have abused 66% of all children under 16, and 96% of those between five and 15. Furthermore, a UK (probably English) study in which 91 sex offenders against children were asked about their offending found that about one third reported having committed offences against more than 10 victims. The reliability of those claiming the most victims was questioned as their claims were inconsistent with those made in a second interview six months later (Elliott et al., 1995). The likelihood is that there are a small number of offenders who offend against large numbers of victims, but they are not typical, and generalisations based on them are best made cautiously, if at all.

How much sexual abuse of children is there in England and Wales?

As will be clear from the above discussion, any attempt to arrive at a realistic estimate of the actual rate of child sexual abuse in England and Wales has to rely on assumptions, guesswork, and a bit of putting one's finger in the wind. Before embarking on such an adventure, however, some confusion can be avoided by ensuring that two terms are properly understood – incidence and prevalence.

Incidence is simply the number of new cases over a period of time, while (period) prevalence refers to the proportion of people in a population who have a certain condition or characteristic at any particular time, and lifetime prevalence those who have ever had that condition or characteristic. Thus, flu has a reasonably high incidence in most years, and a high lifetime prevalence in that most people have had the flu at some time. However, if one were interested only in those who had the flu between June and September the period prevalence for this specific time would be low. In the case of child sexual abuse, the incidence of new cases may be low (e.g. figures such as one case per 1,000 children per year), but a history of having been sexually abused does not go away, so lifetime prevalence rates will gradually increase over time.

It is hard to see, however, how the low incidence rates described above can result in the much higher prevalence rates reported in victim surveys. For example, there are 12.1 million children under the age of 16 in England and Wales. If one liberally assumes an incidence of 5,000 sex offence cautions or convictions against children a year, and, in a somewhat statistically questionable exercise, multiplies this figure by 15 to cover each relevant year, one would calculate a prevalence of 75,000 cases for 12.1 million people, (which would be the case if this cohort were to be questioned about their childhood experiences of sexual abuse 20 years from now). This would give a prevalence rate of 0.6% which is well below even the conservative prevalence rate of eight to 12% suggested by Baker and Duncan

(1985). Doing a similar exercise in respect of only the 8.3 million children between the ages of five to 15 produces a similarly low result.

What then do the various rates described above imply for the 12.1 million children in England and Wales aged under 16? The minimum estimate of child sexual abuse victims a year will be the 3,500 to 5,000 associated with new cautions and convictions contained in official criminal statistics (assuming that all of these relate to different victims). If one accepts the Northern Ireland figures of 1.16 per 1,000 children reported by Mackenzie et al. (1993), however, then one would expect about 14,000 new cases a year. The Baker and Duncan (1985) finding of a prevalence rate in adults of approximately 10% produces an estimate of 121,000 children per year, (albeit with a degree of statistical slight of hand, making the assumptions of 1% new cases each year for the 10 highest at risk years, and no change in prevalence over time). Of these, cases perhaps one half, or 60,500, will have experienced sexual abuse involving physical contact. Finally, police crime reports, based on the annual incidence of about 0.6% for indecent assault and rape described by the Home Office (1997), give rise to a figure of about 72,600 cases a year. All of this, of course, ignores issues of different rates between boys and girls, regional disparities, variations between ethnic groups, differing times at risk, and repeat victimisation, to name but a few problems.

These rough and ready calculations produce an extremely wide estimate of the extent to which children are sexually abused in England and Wales – i.e. somewhere between 3,500 and 72,600 individuals each year. Interestingly, however, it is police crime reports that appear to give the highest rates. This suggests that it is almost certainly worth studying these in more detail on a nation-wide basis. This would not only identify regional variations, but would enable estimates to be made of how many of these reports relate to cases of sexual abuse that potentially could be substantiated, even if charges are never brought.

Effect of child sexual abuse

It is beyond the scope of this review to discuss in any detail the effects child sexual abuse has on its victims, but some comment is nonetheless necessary. There is now a large collection of evidence to demonstrate not only short term emotional and behavioural repercussions in children, but also long term consequences in adulthood.

The impact of sexual abuse on a child will depend on the age at which it occurs, the severity of the abuse, and whether or not it is an isolated event. Most authors

agree that protracted or frequent abuse, genital contact, the use of force, and abuse carried out by a family member or someone else in a position of trust are all associated with more serious consequences. These can range from self-destructive behaviour to aggression to sexual difficulties and inappropriate sexual behaviour in the abused child; older children may develop specific mental disorders (Watkins and Bentovim, 1992; Prentky, in press). In this context it should be noted that while sexual abuse by a stranger is what tends to be of most concern to the general public and is of most interest to the media, it is actually abuse within the family, or by an individual who has a relationship of trust with the child, that is not only more common, but also on the whole more damaging.

There is a wide range of negative outcomes in adults who experienced sexual abuse in childhood, but it can be difficult to disentangle the effects of this from other adverse childhood experiences such as physical abuse and poor parenting. Many studies in this area do not make allowances for this, and describe associations with, for example, high rates of depressive illness, high rates amongst psychiatric inpatients, or high rates of sexual disturbance and aggression, in a way that suggests causation but neglects to demonstrate it.

An exception to this is a particularly good series of studies in New Zealand involving a community sample of women identified in a postal survey and followed up by interview (Mullen et al., 1988; Romans et al., 1997). It was found that serious childhood sexual abuse (i.e. vaginal penetration) was indeed associated with adult psychiatric disorder, low self esteem, deliberate self-harm, eating disorders, increased sexual problems, pregnancy in adolescence, relationship difficulties, and increased likelihood of divorce. However, childhood sexual abuse on its own was neither necessary nor sufficient to produce these problems as other childhood risk factors, such as poor parental mental health, poor relationships with parents, or physical abuse also contributed to negative adult outcomes. In the words of the authors, childhood sexual abuse “clearly has a negative action in leading to increased rates of later problems but it does so in concert with a range of other adverse factors with which it is often found” (Romans et al., 1997, p. 337).

When sexual abuse takes place within the family, or for that matter to a child in care, it is unlikely to be the only profoundly negative influence experienced by the individual. On the other hand, even though a terrifying experience, a child who is abused a single time by a stranger, but who lives within a stable and protective family, may develop little in the way of longer term consequences.

3. Offenders

Individuals who sexually offend against children are an extremely diverse group, and it is not possible to describe the “typical” child molester. They differ in terms of their choice of victim, their criminal backgrounds, their sexual arousal patterns, their social functioning, and their risk of re-offending. Although this list can be lengthened endlessly, it is these features that figure most prominently in the literature and will be discussed below (with the exception of risk of re-offending, which is dealt with separately in Section 4). In addition, a number of other more specific offender related issues have attracted attention, in particular adolescent and female offenders, sex offender rings, and the history of abuse in sex offenders themselves, and these will also be considered here.

General characteristics

Choice of victim

Since the early descriptions of paedophilia made by the German physician Krafft-Ebbing in the 19th century, a distinction has often been made between child molesters who target girls, those who target boys, and those who do not discriminate between the sex of their victims. The proportion of men who fall in each group is difficult to determine, and estimates are usually based on samples of convicted sex offenders. Individual studies must be viewed cautiously before generalising from them. Elliott et al. (1995), for example, found that nearly 30% of a UK sample of offenders reported targeting victims of either sex, but this was almost certainly biased by the fact that about a quarter of the offenders were detained in special hospitals. Bradford et al. (1988) suggested reasonably that approximately 20 to 33% of child sexual abuse is homosexual in nature and about 10% mixed. Bradford et al. (1988) also quote a 1980s survey of the Paedophile Information Exchange which found that most members were attracted either to boys between the ages of 8 to 11 (i.e. prepubertal) or girls aged 11 to 15 (i.e. around or just after the time of puberty). Overall, it is generally believed that cross-over is most likely in those child molesters who target adolescents (Hanson, personal communication).

Typically, offenders who sexually abuse boys or both boys and girls have been said to have more victims and to be at a higher risk of re-offending than those who only offend against girls (Hanson et al., 1993). However, this is not invariably found; one study has suggested emphatically that those with a mixed sex preference are in fact at the highest risk of re-offending (Abel et al., 1988), and another that sex of victim is not related to re-offence risk at all (Prentky et al., 1997).

To summarise; the majority of child molesters sexually assault children they know. Most studies find this to be the case at least three quarters of the time, with up to 80% of offences taking place in either the home of the offender or the home of the victim (Bradford et al., 1988). Community surveys (e.g. Baker and Duncan, 1985) tend to report higher rates of extrafamilial abuse than offender studies, but this is likely to reflect the fact that many of these cases are non-contact in nature as well as being solitary incidents. This is well illustrated in a survey of over 1,200 16 to 21 year olds attending further education colleges in England, Scotland and Wales (Kelly et al., 1991). Of those who reported some form of sexually abusive experience as children, 10% said that the perpetrators were relatives (parents, siblings, uncles/aunts, cousins or grandparents), 46% someone known to them (either an adult or peer), and 44% a stranger. However, if incidents of “flashing” are excluded, then 13% of the perpetrators were relatives, 68% known and just 18% strangers.

Criminal background

Compared with rapists, sex offenders against children have a lower rate of convictions for other, non-sexual offences, although this is still higher than for the general population. For example, a Canadian study of 144 convicted sex offenders divided the sample into four groups:

- men who had sexually assaulted peer age victims;
- those who had sexually assaulted victims between the ages of 12 to 16;
- those who had assaulted female children under the age of 12; and,
- those who had assaulted male children under the age of 12 (Baxter et al., 1984).

While all had criminal histories, the men who offended against girls under 12 had on average less than half the number of theft convictions, as well as a significantly lower number of convictions for non-sexual assaults. The non-sexual criminal profiles of the other three groups were remarkably similar.

Marshall, who was involved in the Baxter et al. (1984) study, continues to believe that men who sexually assault child victims under the age of 14 are less likely to have a non-sexual offending history than other sex offenders (W. L. Marshall, personal communication). This view is supported by the results of a long term follow-up of child molesters and non-sexual offenders released from a maximum security, provincial prison in Ontario, Canada in the 1960s and 1970s (Hanson et al., 1995). This study found that:

- Prior to their index offences, 40% of the child molesters, compared with 83% of the non-sexual criminals in this study had convictions for nonviolent offences; while,
- 16% of the former and 30% of the latter, had convictions for non-sexual violent offences.

- Following release, 83% of the non-sexual criminals and 62% of the child molesters were reconvicted over the next 15 to 30 years.
- Looking at *non-sexual* offences only, 41% of the child molesters compared with 80% of the non-sexual offenders were reconvicted of nonviolent offences; while,
- 14% of the child molesters and 71% of the non-sexual offenders were reconvicted of a non-sexual violent offence.

In summary therefore, the Canadian data suggest that while offences of a non-sexual nature are not uncommon amongst men who sexually offend against children, it is nowhere near the levels of non-sexual criminals or other types of sex offender. For example, Grubin and Gunn's (1990) found that over 80% of convicted rapists had previous criminal histories (a similar figure to that found in most studies of rapists). In comparison, Gibbens et al. (1978) reported that of all father and brother incest offenders before the courts in 1951 and 1961 just 31% had previous non-sexual convictions, while for unlawful sexual intercourse offenders this was the case in 40% (Gibbens et al., 1981). In terms of non-sexual criminals, up to 60% of those released from prison will reoffend over the following four years (Home Office, 1993).

More recently, in a study of the previous criminal convictions of all detected child molesters in Lancashire over a three year period (defined as victim age between 5 to 12), Canter and Kirby (1995) found that 44% of the men had previous convictions (including sexual offences). It is not clear from their figures whether individuals were counted more than once, but they report that 21% had previous convictions for theft, 8% for burglary, 3% for car theft, 2% for criminal damage, and 5% for non-sexual violence. The authors suggest that non-sexual offending is significant in this group, but one must remember that about 30% of all males receive a criminal conviction before the age of 30.

There is little information in the literature about the extent to which sex offenders against children commit other crimes associated with that abuse, such as the possession or production of child pornography. Possession of child pornography is not uncommon in child molesters, although this includes what might otherwise be innocuous publications such as catalogues of children's clothes. Elliott et al. (1995) reported that about a fifth of their sample admitted to using pornography and Howitt (1995) reported use of explicit child pornography to be uncommon in a small interview study. It is generally believed that most of those who produce child pornography do so initially for their own use, but some later attempt to distribute it; this sometimes also occurs as "trade" within child sex rings. In addition, it is thought that some of those involved in

the production of child pornography are not necessarily involved directly with child sexual abuse themselves, and may instead be well connected individuals exploiting children as a business (D. R. Laws; W. L. Marshall, personal communication).

The internet is also becoming the focus for police investigation into the distribution of child pornography, and in the United States is the target for an FBI initiative in co-operation with internet providers called “Innocent Images”, but again there is little in the way of published information about this. In the Netherlands, the police have been examining the nature of pornography on the internet, and it is estimated that about 10% of this relates to children (van den Eshof, personal communication), the majority of which appears to originate in the United States. The difficulty is that even within the European Community laws differ about when an individual is no longer considered to be a child for legal purposes, and as such what is illegal in one country because of the age of the subject may be legal in another.

In summary, therefore, it appears that men who sexually abuse children do commit other non-sexual crimes, but at a rate well below the general criminal population and for sex offenders generally, and which is in fact fairly similar to the male population in general.

Sexual arousal

Although there will of course be some degree of sexual arousal towards children in the vast majority of individuals who sexually offend against children, the strength of this arousal varies between individuals and within an individual over time. The extent to which this arousal can be demonstrated during assessment or with special tests (such as the penile plethysmograph, which directly measures penile responses to sexual cues in pictures or audiotapes,) is problematic. This in itself has given rise to controversy over the use of concepts and terms such as paedophilia. “Paedophilia” has a technical, medical definition that relates to the presence of “recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviours involving sexual activity with . . . children” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), a definition which probably applies to 25 to 40% of those who sexually abuse children (W. L. Marshall, 1997). Because of this, and the confusion that is generated by individuals using the same word to mean different things, some, including Marshall suggest that all those who sexually abuse children should simply be referred to as “child molesters”.

As described above, some offenders target only boys, some only girls, and some children of both sexes. This does not appear to reflect, however, sexual orientation towards adults. Marshall et al. (1988) found, for example, that even in a group of men who had offended exclusively against boys aged five to 10, two thirds had adult heterosexual preferences. In general, however, those who offend primarily against older children (i.e. 15 or 16 years of age) tend to have sexual response patterns in terms of age preference similar to men who offend against adults (Baxter et al., 1984). Some have suggested that this supports the concept of “fixated” and “regressed” paedophiles, of whom the former never develop adult sexual preferences while the latter do but under conditions of stress revert to a preference for children. Although popular in the literature, this has never in fact been demonstrated, nor can it be reliably applied to individual men (Prentky, in press).

Overall, most studies tend to find that men who sexually offend against children outside their families have greater sexual arousal to children than do comparison groups of other offenders and community controls, while varying results have been reported for incest offenders (Prentky, in press). It remains the case, however, that in many child molesters deviant sexual preferences (that is, a sexual preference for children) cannot be demonstrated (Barbaree and Marshall, 1989).

In terms of more extensive sexual deviance, Abel and colleagues in an often quoted series of studies (Abel et al., 1987; Abel et al., 1988; Abel and Rouleau, 1991) claim that when elaborate steps to ensure confidentiality are taken, child molesters (as well as other types of sex offender) report a wide range and high frequency of sexually deviant behaviour. Unfortunately, the results are presented in a confusing manner which makes it difficult to differentiate specific offender groups and deviant behaviours, with many individuals and behaviours counted more than once. However, it appears that about half their sample of 561 men had both adult and child victims, about one fifth targeted both males and females (although this includes offenders against adults as well as children), and about one quarter offended against both family and non-family victims. They also claim that about 40 to 60% of non-incest offenders, and 25 to 40% of incest offenders, develop their “deviant interest” before the age of 18 (although given that many of these interests would also be age appropriate at the time it is unclear how this conclusion was reached).

These results have, on occasion, been criticised, not only for their confused presentation but also for the likely unrepresentativeness of the sample (as

mentioned earlier in this report, many of the subjects were recruited through media advertisements). A perhaps more sober exploration of these issues was carried out by Marshall et al. (1991) on a sample of 129 convicted but not incarcerated child molesters. They found that less than 12% had engaged in deviant sexual behaviour apart from the type associated with their index offences – excluding the few who engaged in homosexual behaviour with adults. Just 5% had both adult and child victims, 9% had targeted victims of both sexes, and none of the incest offenders had offended against children outside their families. However, although slightly lower, there were not dramatic differences in the proportion of those who said they had developed their “deviant interests” in adolescence. Similarly, Elliott et al. (1995) reported that about a third of their sample said their sexual interest in children began before the age of 16.

Some of the discrepancy between the Abel and Marshall findings may relate to sample selection. Indeed, when Marshall et al. (1991) looked more specifically at those in their study with the highest deviant arousal, highest sex drive, or having greater numbers of victims, their results became more similar, although still short of, those described by Abel. It might be reasonable to conclude from this, therefore, that the majority of sex offenders against children do not have an additional repertoire of other types of sexual crime, but there is a small group of highly deviant offenders who do.

Thus, although sexual arousal to children is clearly relevant to understanding the behaviour of child molesters, it takes us only so far on its own. Social factors, and in particular a preoccupation with children generally, are probably of equal importance both in terms of causation, and in relation to assessing risk.

Social behaviour

Numerous studies have suggested that men who sexually offend against children are socially deficient in some way. In particular, they are said to have poor social skills, to lack assertiveness, and to have low self-esteem, although again there is substantial variation between offenders. Further blurring the picture was a recent study by Marshall et al. (1995) in which it was found that when compared with college students, a group of child molesters did indeed have lower self esteem, were more socially anxious, and were less assertive. When compared with a community sample from a similar background, however, these differences disappeared. What may be of particular relevance in this respect was a finding of Pithers et al. (1989) that many child molesters appear to

experience a significant drop in their self-confidence near to the time when offending takes place. Interestingly, McKibben et al. (1994) found that negative mood states were associated with an increase in deviant sexual fantasies in child molesters.

Overall, the relationship between social functioning and sexual offending varies between individuals. Neither low mood nor social isolation, for example, are likely to be closely related to the offending of the minority of men whose targeting of children is a specific objective congruent with their own general desires and goals. In addition, research in England has found considerable heterogeneity in the social competence of child abusers when compared with a community sample. Incest offenders were indistinguishable from non-offending men while extrafamilial abusers of boys in particular had lower self-esteem, poorer assertion, and high levels of emotional loneliness (Beckett et al., 1994).

Perhaps more significant than social interaction *per se* is recent research suggesting that men who sexually offend against children report a lack of intimacy and high levels of emotional loneliness (Ward et al., 1995). It has been suggested that this relates to inherent problems in the ability of these men to form and maintain normal relationships with adults (even if they are in adult relationships). Children, who are less demanding and easier to control, are used in an attempt to meet their needs for emotional intimacy.

Although it is beyond the scope of this report to discuss child molester classification systems in any detail, it is of interest that the most rigorously formulated and validated typology makes use of two variables that relate explicitly to social behaviour. These are the level of social competence and the amount of contact with children (Prentky et al., 1989; Knight and Prentky, 1990). They describe a number of different “types” of child molester depending on the way these two factors interact with the degree of fixation the individual has on children, and the amount of violence he displays towards them. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent this typology will lead to reliable predictions about offending patterns, offender profiles, and risk of re-offending.

In summary, while social competence is relevant to the aetiology and maintenance of sex offending against children, its actual relationship will vary between individuals. Both high and low social competence may have an impact on offending patterns, albeit along different pathways.

Adolescents

The important contribution made by young offenders to sexual abuse statistics is becoming increasingly recognised. Sexual deviance in adolescents is no longer simply viewed as innocent sexual learning and exploration (Becker et al., 1986), although it must be admitted that relatively little is known about normal sexual behaviour in children (Vizard et al., 1995). Overall, however, the extent of sex offending by adolescents is unclear. James and Neil (1996) quote a number of American studies suggesting a range for sex offences of all types somewhere between 1.6 and 3.5 per 1,000 males depending on state and age range. About 15% of arrests for forcible rape in the U. S. are of youths under 18 years of age (Ryan et al., 1996). Davis and Leitenberg (1987) estimate that 30 to 50% of sex offences against children in America in the early 1980s was committed by adolescents. In general, American prevalence data in relation to juveniles are summarised well by Weinrott (1997).

A database holding information on over 1,600 adolescent sex offenders in North America has been compiled by the National Adolescent Perpetrator Network (Ryan et al., 1996). It is not clear how representative of adolescent sex offenders this database is, but it comprises cases from a large number of sex offender programmes and probably provides a reasonable profile of the more severe end of the spectrum. The results are not broken down by age of victim or age difference between offender and victim, but the vast majority of victims (91%) were between the ages of three and 16, with nearly two thirds under the age of nine. 39% of victims were related to the offender and lived in the same household, while only 6% of victims were strangers. About two thirds of offences involved either vaginal or anal penetration or oral-genital contact, and a third involved physical force. Interestingly, about a quarter of the offenders who were over 12 had been sexually abusive before that age, but under 10% of the sample had previously been charged with a sexual offence.

In terms of England and Wales, Vizard et al. (1995) noted that about 30% of all sex offence convictions or cautions are of individuals under 21 years of age, while in Liverpool, Horne et al. (1991) reported that 36% of those who sexually offended against children were under 18. In our own survey of five police forces described earlier, one force recorded the age of perpetrator: in that force area sex crimes committed by perpetrators aged under 18 against victims under 16 accounted for on average 12% of recorded sexual crime.

In an attempt to estimate the annual incidence of sexual offending in Oxfordshire by males aged 12 to 17, James and Neil (1996) carried out a survey

of those involved in child protection and reported a figure of 1.5 per 1,000 males of that age. Like Ryan et al. (1996), they too did not analyse their findings by age of victim or age difference between victim and offender, but reported that average victim age was 9.8 (range two to 23). Over 80% of victims were female, more than half of the abusers had more than one victim (the average number of victims was 1.8), two thirds of cases involved physical contact and 41% penetration, and just 10% of cases involved strangers.

Richardson et al. (1997) reported on a group of 100 male adolescent offenders (aged 11 to 18) in England, and unlike Ryan et al. (1996) and James and Neil (1996), they did differentiate the sample according to victim age, as well as by relationship between offender and victim. They described four groups of adolescent sex offender:

- a *Child Group* of 31 subjects who abused a victim four or more years younger than themselves;
- an *Incest Group* of 20 subjects who abused siblings;
- a *Peer Group* of 24 subjects who abused similar or older aged victims; and
- a *Mixed Group* of 22 subjects.

Victims from the *Child Group* tended to be younger neighbourhood children, members of their extended families, or other residents in foster or children's homes, with 45% of the offences occurring in a "surrogate" home. 41% of the victims of the *Child Group* were male, about twice the rate of the *Mixed* and *Incest* groups (no *Peer Group* victims were male). Antisocial behaviour and delinquency in general were common across all the groups, but greatest amongst those who offended against peers or older victims, and least so in the incest offenders. The backgrounds of those who offended against victims of a similar age or older were found to have much in common with adult rapists, while the comparative lower degree of antisocial behaviour in the group who offended against younger children is similar to what is found in adult child molesters.

To summarise, adolescent sex offenders appear to be as heterogeneous as their adult counterparts, and the types of behaviour they carry out similar (Vizard et al., 1995; Richardson et al., 1997; W. L. Marshall, 1997). Although many will offend against children, this is often secondary to the fact that the ages of their victims will be similar to their own – their sexual interests are “age appropriate”, and only a proportion who target younger victims appear to have a sexual interest in children per se. It is adolescents in this latter group who best fit the description of “sex offenders against children” (Becker et al., 1986; Richardson et al., 1997). Although as described above a large proportion of adult child molesters report that their deviant interests begin in adolescence (Abel et al., 1987; Marshall et al., 1991), the vast majority of adolescent sex offenders do not reoffend as adults (Weinrott, 1997). Better identification of those adolescent sex offenders most at risk of becoming adult sex offenders, and the development of effective treatment programmes for them, would clearly be of benefit.

Females

The issue of women as perpetrators of child sexual abuse has been taken seriously only over about the last 15 years, and the actual extent of the problem is even more difficult to determine than it is for male offenders. Part of the difficulty, of course, is in the definition of sexual abuse, as in western societies women are permitted greater freedom than men in their physical interactions with children. In addition, overt sexual activity between an adult female and a boy may not be conceptualised by the child as “sexual abuse” even if he is emotionally unprepared for it and psychologically destabilised as a result (Johnson and Shrier, 1987). Indeed, in spite of his confusion the child may be encouraged to view the event as proof of his virility.

Figures for recorded offences of child sexual abuse by women, and allegations of such abuse, would seem to suggest that sexual abuse by women is uncommon: according to *Criminal Statistics*, less than 1% of all sex offences are committed by women. Of the 1,031 allegations or suspicions of child abuse in Greater Manchester in 1992 (Rogers and Roberts, 1995), only 3.5% of perpetrators were female. In a survey of all cautioned and convicted sexual abuse cases between 1988 and 1994 in the West Midlands found that just 10 cases (2.5%) involved female offenders (Morris et al., 1997). In our survey of five force areas described earlier, just 1% of recorded sex crimes against children was attributed to females in the one force for which we had this information.

Population surveys find slightly higher numbers of female abusers, mostly associated with boy victims. For example, a large national survey in the United States was carried out involving over 2,600 telephone interviews. It found that of the 27% of women and 16% of men who reported a history of some form of sexual abuse in childhood, females accounted for 1% of the offences against girls compared with 17% of the offences against boys (Finkelhor et al., 1990).

Other general population surveys have reported results consistent with this, that is, low rates of sexual abuse of girls carried out by females, but higher levels of boy victims. Bickerton et al.'s (1991) interview study of over 1,200 women attending a well woman and family planning clinic found that of the 43 women reporting abuse, only one case involved a female abuser. In Romans et al.'s (1996) random sample of adult women in New Zealand, 2% of perpetrators were reported to be female. In contrast, a survey of male students at 32 American universities found that of the 216 men with a history of having been sexually abused, the perpetrator was said to have been female in 48% of cases (Risin and Koss, 1987). Another American university sample reported that of 61 men who described a history of childhood sexual abuse, over 70% alleged that the abuser was female (Fromuth and Burkhart, 1989), although one might want to view this latter finding with some scepticism.

Amongst offender samples, Craissati and McClurg (1996) in south east London reported that 7% of the sexual abuse reported to have been experienced by adult male offenders was carried out by females. In the American adolescent sex offender database described above (Ryan et al., 1996), 22% of the male adolescent offenders who described a history of sexual abuse claimed that the perpetrator was female.

In contrast to the population surveys described above in which boys appear to be the predominate targets of female perpetrators, studies of female sex offenders and of abused children themselves suggest that female offenders are as likely to abuse girls as boys (O'Connor, 1987; Rudin et al., 1995; Saradjian, 1996). This discrepancy probably arises from the large number of cases where a female acts together with a male partner, which is said to be the situation in from one half to three quarters of female perpetrators (Rudin et al., 1995; Hunter and Mathews, 1997). Additional support for this view comes from a study of adolescent female sexual offenders, a large proportion of whom reported a history of sexual abuse; although just 4% of this abuse involved a female acting alone, 38% involved both a female and a male perpetrator (Mathews et al., 1997). Saradjian (1996), however, suggests that a number of women abusers who initially were coerced by men go on to sexually offend on their own.

Data is sparse about the offending details of female perpetrators. O'Connor (1987) collected information on all female sex offenders remanded to HMP Holloway between 1974 and 1985. The study found 19 cases of indecent assault on a person under 16, six cases of indecency with children, and 14 cases of unlawful sexual intercourse with a victim under the age of 16 (most if not all of the latter committed together with a man). In their survey of sexual abuse histories in American university students, Risin and Koss (1987) noted that females were responsible for 45% of the reports of exhibitionism, 38% of cases of fondling, and 49% of cases in which penetration occurred.

It is generally believed that female sex offenders against children tend to select children known to them. Overall, about 60% of cases are intrafamilial in nature, and about a fifth of cases involving female adolescent offenders are associated with babysitting (Risin and Koss, 1987; Hunter and Mathews, 1997; Mathews et al., 1997). In studies from centres where child sex abuse victims are treated, the severity of abuse suffered is reported to be independent of the sex of the perpetrator (Rudin et al., 1995), although it has been suggested that the sex offences of adolescent as opposed to adult females involve more force. Adolescents are also more likely to offend alone than are their adult female counterparts.

In a study of 50 female sex offenders in England, Saradjian (1996) identified three main groups: those who target young children, those who target adolescents, and those who are coerced by men. She referred to a small number of women who did not fit into these groups as either atypical, or ritual abusers. Sex of victim reflected the sexual orientation of the perpetrator in the case of older children, but victim gender was less relevant where the children were very young. Like male offenders, women also “groom” children both to obtain compliance and to prevent disclosure, they carry out similar sexual behaviours (although they use their fingers or objects instead of a penis), and they may offend over a long period of time. Most of the women were reluctant to describe their sexual fantasies, but those who did so reported both “seductive” and “sadistic” sexual imagery.

To summarise, although it is important not to deny the reality of the sexual abuse of children by females, nor to minimise the impact this has on victims, in both public health and policing terms it is dwarfed by the problem of the sexual abuse of children by men. Thus, while it is essential to deal with cases of sexual offending by females when they arise, it is hard to justify a shift of emphasis and resources away from the much larger picture of male offenders.

Networks

There has been a good deal of interest in recent years in relation to sex offenders who operate in networks, as well as with claims of larger rings involved in ritualistic or satanic abuse. In the 1990s there have been disturbing accounts of actual networks such as that described in Belgium (of which little as yet is in the public domain). In addition there have been unsubstantiated allegations of organised child sexual abuse such as those in the north west of England and the Orkney Islands and rumours of networks involving “well-connected” men in Canada. Neither the research nor the academic literature, however, contains much of substance on this topic, although it may be the case that more is known within police force intelligence circles that has not made it into print.

Networks may be formed within institutions, within extended families (often involving female as well as male perpetrators), or amongst groups of paedophiles where all members are not necessarily known to each other (La Fontaine, 1996). While the first two types of network tend to exploit existing relationships with children, the last often involves the active recruitment of children; any of these networks may be associated with accompanying rituals secondary to sexual activity. La Fontaine (1996) claims, based on a search of child protection files in eight social service areas in England, that the annual number of cases of organised abuse (i.e. involving multiple perpetrators) falling into one of these categories in England and Wales is about 240. One must be cautious about the evidence on which this is based, which is often the testimony of highly disturbed children, but if this estimate is accurate, then organised abuse clearly represents a very small proportion indeed of all sexual abuse of children. When they do arise, however, cases invariably involve relatively large numbers of children, and as such are correspondingly complicated to manage and can attract a good deal of media attention.

Networks may also be formed based on one adult and several child victims, all of whom are aware of the participation of the others (Burgess et al., 1981). Indeed, this is probably the most common type of organised abuse. In a study in Leeds that focused specifically on child sex rings, Wild (1989) reported that between 1984 and 1986, 31 such rings were identified, of which 25 (81%) involved a single perpetrator and three involved two offenders; just three (10%) concerned four or more perpetrators. Victims comprised 296 girls (21 of the rings being all female) and 38 boys (three rings being all male), with a mean victim age of 11.6, but boys were on average younger (9.9) than the girls (12.2). In two-thirds of the rings one or more children acted as a ringleader, recruiting new victims.

A looser form of network is provided by pro-paedophilia organisations such as the Paedophile Information Exchange (PIE) that promote the “sexual rights of children”, challenging the legitimacy of age of consent laws. The numbers of men who belong to such organisations are unknown, and as Hanson and Scott (1996) point out, their mailing lists are likely to be inflated by sex researchers and undercover police officers. Many child molesters will also know other child molesters, even if they do not actively collaborate with each other. Such relationships may not only provide moral support for sexual offending against children, but they can also provide knowledge of where to find victims. Hanson and Scott (1996) examined the extent to which convicted child molesters knew other people who had committed similar crimes. They found that the typical offender had one or two current friends who had committed sexual offences against children, unlike the social circles of convicted rapists, non-sexual criminals and a community non-offender sample.

Issues of child sex rings and organised sexual abuse can become blurred with those relating to child prostitution and child pornography. Whether or not a pimp controls the child, there is clearly the potential for one child to interact sexually with more or less well organised groups of men or women. Wild (1989) described two prostitution rings involving adolescent boys based in bars and clubs on the edge of Leeds city centre run by four homosexual men. Boys were taken to the homes of customers, or transported for short periods to other cities. One of these rings involved runaways and socially deprived boys. Although it has been estimated that there are over 5,000 British children under the age of 16 involved in prostitution (Childhood Matters, 1996), this can really be no more than a guess; the truth is that the scale of the problem is simply not known.

Lanning (1993), from a police perspective, and Putnam (1993) from a more academic basis, provide good reviews of claims for the existence of extensive, multinational networks incorporating satanic abuse. Both describe the uncritical acceptance of poor quality evidence and research studies purporting to demonstrate such cabals, and the lack of well documented cases in spite of aggressive investigation by the police. They note that information tends to be disseminated through “seminars” and the media rather than through more critical channels. They go on to comment that controversy about whether elaborate and fantastic rituals have occurred risk obscuring the more fundamental question of the extent to which small groups of men (and women) may be involved in the fairly unsophisticated, but nonetheless traumatic, procurement of children for the purposes of sexual activity.

In summary, the general view of those active in sex offender research appears to be that the vast majority of sex offenders against children typically act alone, although they may interact with a social network that either supports or condones their activity. Indeed, some sexual offenders against children may avoid networks altogether because of the possibly increased risks of detection. In addition, it should not be forgotten that many offenders against children are known to be isolated, and as described above even when in relationships often experience a profound sense of emotional loneliness that is believed to contribute to their offending (W. L. Marshall, 1989).

The association between being a victim and becoming an abuser

A history of childhood sexual abuse is often found amongst both adult and adolescent child molesters, but findings in individual studies differ radically. In a review of a large number of such studies, for example, Hanson and Slater (1988) found that on average about 28% of adult offenders describe sexual victimisation in childhood. This is higher than non-offender community samples of men which, as referred to above, tend to find a rate for males in the vicinity of 10%. The range between studies of zero to 66% was extremely wide; the upper end of this range was recently extended to 79% by an updated review carried out for the United States House of Representatives (1996). Similarly, Vizard et al. (1995) reported a range of 30 to 70% in studies of adolescent sex offenders.

Hanson and Slater (1988) also observed that while there may be a tendency by non-offenders to under-report their experiences of child sexual abuse, sex offenders may over-report it in an attempt to gain sympathy, or to excuse their behaviour. Given this caveat, however, most studies tend to find a higher incidence of sexual abuse in the backgrounds of child molesters than in men who, for example, rape adult women. It has also been reported that offenders who display a greater sexual preference for children have a higher incidence of sexual victimisation in their backgrounds than do those whose preferences are not as strong (Groth, 1979).

Early studies also reported higher rates of sexual abuse histories in men who offend against boys compared with those whose victims are girls. In order to clarify whether some subgroups of sexual offenders against children were more likely to have been sexually abused as children, Hanson and Slater (1988) carried out a meta-analysis of relevant research, which is in effect a statistical summary of data reported in a number of different studies. As illustrated in Table 2 below, they found that offenders whose victims were boys were in fact significantly more likely

to have been abused themselves as children than those whose victims were girls. Those who offended against both sexes had the highest rate of such abuse, although this last finding must be treated cautiously, as numbers in this group were small. No significant differences were found between the abuse histories of incest offenders as opposed to those whose victims were from outside their families.

Table 2: Findings of meta-analysis comparing childhood histories of sexual abuse in subgroups of sex offenders against children

Offence history	Number of offenders	% abused
female victims	754	18%
male victims	260	35%
victims of both sexes	45	67%
incest	374	27%
extrafamilial	444	24%

Source: Hanson and Slater, 1988

Age at which childhood abuse occurs may also influence adult offending. Prentky and Knight (1993) found that in child molesters with a history of childhood sexual abuse, those who committed their first assault when they were less than 15 years of age were on average sexually victimised at a younger age than those who committed their first sex offence as adults. They also found that the abuse they experienced was more severe; this pattern was not found in men who had raped adult women. Greenberg et al. (1993) also found that men with sexual abuse histories who offended against children 12 years of age or younger reported sexual abuse occurring at a younger age (a mean of 8.4 years) than men who offended against children between the ages of 13 to 16 (mean age of 10.9). In a perhaps interesting variant of this, Prentky et al. (1989) reported that for sex offenders generally, there was a greater severity of future sexual aggression in those who lived in families in which sexually deviant behaviour took place but where this behaviour did not actually involve them. This could include, for example, incestuous activity between other family members, or the production of pornography.

Craissati and McClurg (1996) carried out a study involving all men convicted of child sex abuse in south east London over a two year period (n=80). They did not find a relationship between a history of sex abuse and age of victim (although it is not clear whether they broke victim age down in the same way as did Greenberg et al., 1993). However they did find that those who reported sexual abuse as children were more likely to abuse male children, to offend against a

greater number of victims, to admit to deviant sexual fantasies, and to have higher levels of hostility.

Sexual abuse in childhood is often postulated to be an important contributor to later sexual offending against children, but as with the more general adverse effects caused by childhood sexual abuse described above, it is difficult to identify a specific causal link between the abuse and adult sexual offending. An important factor influencing whether a child victim becomes an abuser, however, may simply be the amount of intrafamilial violence to which he is exposed. Skuse et al. (1998) carried out a study based in the south of England of boys between the ages of 11 and 16 who had been the victims of sexual abuse. They found that the 11 boys who had *also* sexually abused others differed from a comparison group of 14 sexually abused boys who had not done so in the amount of violence they had witnessed within their families before their offending took place. The authors refer to “a climate of intrafamilial violence” as being a “potent risk factor” in the move from victim to offender.

It is important to note, however, as the researchers themselves point out, that the Skuse et al. (1998) study involved adolescent perpetrators, and as such may relate only to those individuals who begin offending as adolescents. In addition, it is not clear whether the phenomenon they are describing relates to sexual offending in general, or sex offending against children in particular – assuming the victims in this study were also children (no information is given about this). As discussed above this may simply be a reflection of the perpetrator’s age rather than a sexual attraction to children *per se*. Nevertheless, their results are resonant with American work in which it has been found that amongst adult sex offenders, an important predictor of further sexual violence is a history of caregiver inconstancy (i.e. frequent changes in primary caregivers). This in itself is partly related to the presence of maternal violence (Prentky, in press).

As many men who sexually offend against children do not have a history of abuse themselves, such a history is clearly not a necessary contributor to adult offending. Similarly, because only a minority of those who are sexually abused go on to offend, a history of sexual victimisation is not sufficient in itself to create a sexual offender. Histories of childhood sexual abuse in sex offenders are invariably associated with other childhood risk factors such as neglect, family instability, and problematic parenting (Seghorn et al., 1987; Craissati and McClurg, 1996; James and Neil, 1996). Following its extensive review of the subject, the Report to the United States House of Representatives (1996, p.13) could only conclude that:

“Further research would be necessary to determine what kinds of experiences magnify the likelihood that sexually victimized children will become adult sexual offenders against children and, alternatively, what kinds of experiences help prevent victimized children from becoming adult sexual offenders against children”.

There are a number of ways in which childhood sexual abuse could contribute to adult sexual offending against children (W. L. Marshall, 1997). Most straightforward are “cycle of abuse” theories which suggest that children learn behaviours that are modelled for them. Alternatively, it may be that in recapitulating their experiences men with a history of sexual abuse overcome the trauma they themselves suffered by taking out their anger on others. It could also be argued that abusing other children is a way in which an individual defends himself from the worst aspects of his abusive experience. He rationalises what happened to him as a positive event, and hence there is no reason why it should not be repeated with others. Another possibility is that premature sexual experience interferes with the future development of intimate sexual and emotional relationships, causing the individual to view children as partners who can be controlled without the need to negotiate the hurdles inherent in adult relationships.

In summary, the simple answer to the question of how childhood sexual abuse contributes to adult sexual offending, is that we do not know.

4. Risk of re-offending

There tends to be a general perception that sex offenders carry with them a high risk of sexual re-offending. In reality, however, recidivism rates for sexual crime amongst sex offenders are relatively low. This discrepancy has a number of causes: the distinction between re-offending and reconviction, the media interest and public anger that ensues when sex offenders do reoffend, and a small number of more prolific offenders who generate justified anxiety. It is also likely to relate to the nature of sex offending itself, where any re-offence may be seen as unacceptable (Grubin and Wingate, 1996).

Numerous studies of sex offender populations have demonstrated that most sex offenders are not *reconvicted* for sex offences. For example, a 1960s follow-up of over 2,900 Danish sex offenders (Christiansen, 1965, quoted in Prentky, in press) found that just 11% were convicted of another sex offence over a period of 12 to 24 years. Child molesters had the lowest rates of re-offending, although it should be noted that in post-war Denmark offences against children may not have been readily detected. A more recent UK report found that only 7% of a randomly selected sample of over 900 sex offenders (men with either current or past convictions for sex offences) released from prison in 1987 had been reconvicted of a sex offence by 1991 (P. Marshall, 1994). Amongst a group of more serious sex offenders released from prison in California, who formed an untreated control group in a major treatment study, only 14% sexually reoffended (based on information obtained from a variety of sources in addition to reconviction records) over four years (Marques et al., 1994).

The last word in respect of recidivism, however, is almost certainly a large meta-analysis (as described above, a combination of data from a collection of studies) carried out by Hanson and Bussiere (in press) that included nearly 29,000 sex offenders followed-up on average for four to five years. The meta-analysis found a sexual recidivism of 13% for child molesters and 19% for rapists, while recidivism for offences of non-sexual violence was 10% and 22%, respectively. These figures need to be viewed in the context of recidivism for male offenders in general released from prison, where the rate is about 50% over two years and 60% over four.

Reconviction, of course, is not equivalent to re-offending, and as discussed earlier in this report the majority of offences do not lead to conviction. The only study to look at this in detail is that of Marshall and Barbaree (1988), who made use of a variety of “unofficial records” held by police and others in their follow-up of offenders and controls in one of their treatment studies. For the 126 men in the study, they detected 2.4 “offenders” for every official conviction. In contrast, however, the ongoing Californian study referred to above which also made use of non-official sources has not as yet found high rates of re-offending, although the

discrepancy between “re-offence” and reconviction has not been looked at formally (Marques, personal communication). Another perspective on this issue is provided by the work of Broadhurst and colleagues in western Australia who looked at arrests, rather than convictions, for sex offences over a 10 year period. They found that those arrested for sex offences against children under 14 had a probability of rearrest for the same offence of 20%, while those arrested for incest had a probability of rearrest for this offence of 13% (Broadhurst, personal communication).

What is not clear is whether re-offending that does not lead to reconviction is evenly distributed amongst all offenders, or whether it is biased towards certain individuals, for example, more active offenders who are eventually caught and convicted anyway. It would be premature at this stage, however, simply to multiply recidivism rates across the board by the 2.4 “correction factor” suggested by the Marshall and Barbaree study (1988) to determine “real” rates of re-offending.

There is also a problem about length of follow-up. Soothill and Gibbens (1978), for instance, followed-up a group of men convicted of sex offences against girls and found that at five years the reconviction rate was 11%, but this had increased to 18% at 24 years. Similarly, a long term follow-up study of nearly 200 child molesters released from Canadian prisons found that a quarter of all reconvictions for sexual or violent crime took place between 10 and 31 years after release (Hanson et al., 1993). Overall, re-offending tends to be greatest in the first five years, and then about half this rate for the next 10 years, following which it tails off rapidly.

Thus, one would expect 20 to 25% of a general sample of sex offenders released from prison to go on to commit a further sex offence, although the risk of re-offending will persist for many years. Similar figures are not available for convicted sex offenders not sent to prison, but the recidivism rate is likely to be lower for this group. Regardless, this persistence in offending is greater than that for male offenders generally, and as such the long term risk sex offenders pose to the community is almost certainly greater than it is for many other types of offender.

However, it is possible to identify subgroups with higher re-offending rates. For example, about half of the child molesters discharged from the Massachusetts Treatment Center for Sexually Dangerous Persons were rearrested for a new sex offence, and 42% were convicted. This was after an average time in the community of five and a half years, although the overall follow-up period was about 25 years (Prentky et al., 1997). 35% of child molesters released from a maximum security provincial prison in Canada sexually reoffended over a 15 to 30 year follow-up period (Hanson et al., 1995). Similarly, about a third of sex offenders against children who had committed more serious offences (i.e. those who had received

sentences of at least four years) and were released from English prisons in 1980 were reconvicted of a sex offence over the next 10 years (Thornton and Travers, 1991).

Therefore, in order to make sensible predictions about the re-offending of sex offenders, it is necessary:

- first to determine those factors that increase the risk of re-offending;
- then to identify subgroups of individuals based on these risk factors; and,
- finally to establish reliable base rates for sexual re-offending for each of the different subgroups.

Prediction of re-offending

A number of categories of information have been put forward as being important in the prediction of sexual re-offending by sex offenders. Most commonly accepted are factors such as offending history, deviant sexual arousal patterns, and previous prison sentences (Quinsey et al., 1995; Prentky et al., 1997; Hanson and Bussiere, in press). Overwhelmingly, however, it is sexual offending history that contributes most to the successful prediction of recidivism. Hanson and Bussiere, for example, in their large meta-analysis involving nearly 29,000 offenders referred to above found that under 10% of first offenders are reconvicted within five years of prison release, compared with a recidivism rate of over 30% for those with any previous sex offence convictions. In this respect, it is interesting that in the 24 year follow-up studies of Soothill and Gibbens (1978), all the men with three or more previous convictions who reoffended did so within five years.

In their meta-analysis Hanson and Bussiere (in press) also found that over 20 variables contributed to the successful prediction of sexual recidivism, but for most of these the magnitude of the relationship was so small that it was of negligible practical use. In the end they were able to identify about 10 variables that made some, mostly small, contribution to predictive accuracy, including being unmarried and dropping out of a treatment programme. They found that risk scales that predicted general (i.e. non-sexual) recidivism well were related only weakly to sexual recidivism.

The largest single predictor of sexual recidivism found by this study was the presence of deviant sexual preferences, and they concluded that sex offender recidivism was closely related to sexual deviance. They suggested that this could be inferred in a number of ways:

- from the presence of a lengthy history of sex offending or an early onset of that offending;
- the commission of a variety of sex crimes;
- evidence of offences against boys or strangers; and,

- penile plethysmography (as mentioned above, the measurement of penile response to sexual stimuli).

A number of instruments have been developed in an attempt to organise some of these variables into risk prediction tools (e.g. Quinsey et al., 1995; Boer et al. 1997; Prentky et al., 1997), but the validity of only two has been demonstrated to any extent. These are described below.

Rapid Risk Assessment for Sex Offence Recidivism (RRASOR)

This scale has been developed by Dr Karl Hanson of the Department of the Solicitor General of Canada (Hanson, 1997). It is intended to be used as a brief actuarial tool for screening purposes. It was based on the findings of Hanson and Bussiere (in press) and data from a number of North American sex offender follow-up studies, but was subsequently tested on an independent sample of sex offenders released from prisons in England and Wales in 1979 and followed-up for 16 years.

The RRASOR score for any individual is based on the number of past sex offence convictions or charges he has, his age at the time of the assessment, his relationship to his victims, and the sex of his victims, with additional weight given to his sex offence history. It is possible to score from zero to six points on this scale. The scoring procedure is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: The RRASOR scoring system	
Items	Points
<i>Past sex offences</i>	
0	0
1 conviction or 1 to 2 charges	1
2 to 3 convictions or 3 to 5 charges	2
4+ convictions or 6+ charges	3
<i>Age</i>	
less than 25	1
<i>Victim gender</i>	
any male	1
<i>Relationship to victim</i>	
any non-related	1

Source: Hanson (1997)

Nearly 2,600 sex offenders were rated with the RRASOR system, and their reconviction rates at five and 10 years determined (some of the data included charges as well as reconvictions). It can be seen from Table 4 that the system distinguished risk groups for sexual recidivism reasonably well, with a consistent increase in recidivism rates with higher scores. In addition, the majority of sex offenders were classified as low to moderate risk – 80% of the population scored between zero and two, and in this group five year sexual recidivism was under 15%. Thus, if one relied on this system as a screening tool to identify a higher risk group for greater attention, it would be possible to focus on just 20% of the sample.

Table 4: The RRASOR classification system: sexual recidivism at five and 10 years			
Score	Number in group	% recidivism at five years	% recidivism at 10 years
0	527 (20%)	4%	7%
1	806 (31%)	8%	11%
2	742 (29%)	14%	21%
3	326 (13%)	25%	37%
4	139 (5%)	33%	49%
5	52 (2%)	50%	73%
Total	2592	13%	20%

Source: Hanson (1997)

Although RRASOR was based on both rapists and child molesters, separating the two groups out did not have any great impact on the results. It was also of interest that although child molesters are generally older than rapists, the effect of age was similar in the two groups – in other words, contrary to expectations, it was the younger child molester who was at higher risk of reconviction (Hanson, personal communication).

It should be noted, however, that although the risk of reconviction is greatest in those who score three or higher, there are a much larger number of individuals who score zero to two. Therefore, in absolute terms more of these latter individuals are reconvicted: at five years, 189 of the 2,075 men scoring zero to two are reconvicted compared with 154 of the 517 who score three to five.

SACJ Risk Classification

A second promising risk classification algorithm has been developed by Dr David Thornton of HM Prison Service within the context of the national prison Sex

Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP), and is referred to as “Structured Anchored Clinical Judgement” (SACJ). It is designed so that the assessment of risk can change over time as more information about an offender becomes available. It too is based on variables described in the sex offending literature as being predictive of sexual re-offending, but unlike RRASOR it is not dependent solely on archival data.

The SACJ risk classification is a three step process, with risk reassessed at each step. Like RRASOR, it is based on a simple point system, with one point scored for each of the following:

- a current sex offence;
- a past conviction for a sex offence;
- a non-sexual violent offence in the current conviction;
- a past conviction for non-sexual violence; and,
- more than three past convictions of any sort.

Risk level is then determined as in Table 5.

Table 5: SACJ risk classification: step one		
Points	Level	Risk
1	I	Lower
2	II	Medium
3	III	High

Source: Dr David Thornton, HM Prison Service (personal communication)

Step two relates to aggravating factors. If two or more of the following are present, the individual is moved up one risk category level:

- male victim, any sex offence;
- stranger victim, any sex offence;
- any non-contact sex offence;
- substance abuse (not simply recreational);
- ever been in care;
- never married;
- deviant sexual arousal;
- score of 25+ on the PCL-R³.

³ This refers to the Psychopathy Checklist, an instrument based on personality style and antisocial lifestyle developed by Robert Hare in Canada (Hare et al., 1988; Hare, 1991). It has been shown to be a good predictor of violent (but not sexual) offending.

Step three is based on progress in prison. The risk category is increased if the offender fails to complete an offending behaviour programme, shows a deterioration while in treatment, or has displayed “sex offending relevant behaviour” in prison within the past five years. Conversely, the risk category is decreased one level if there is successful programme completion, there is significant improvement in risk factors associated with offending, *and* there is acceptable performance on these risk factors. For example, an offender who dropped out of SOTP or who continued to display an interest in pictures of children while in prison would move up a risk level. On the other hand, an offender who completed SOTP, no longer displayed distorted thinking about children, who had developed appropriate victim empathy and who demonstrated an ability to devise strategies to reduce his exposure to situations that might lead to offending, would have his risk level reduced.

The SACJ risk classification was tested on a cohort of 533 sex offenders (of whom 80% had offended against children) released from prison in 1979 and followed-up for 16 years. The results based on information from step one and some from step two (victim gender, victim stranger, non-contact sex offences, and marital status), a so-called “low information” version of SACJ, are illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6: SACJ risk classification: sexual reconviction at 16 years follow-up		
Level	Number of offenders	reconviction (%)
I	162 (30%)	15 (9%)
II	231 (43%)	53 (23%)
III	140 (26%)	64 (46%)
Total	533	132 (25%)

Source: Dr David Thornton, HM Prison Service (personal communication)

Thus, like RRASOR the SACJ risk assessment scale also appears to identify accurately three groups of sex offender:

- a lower risk group comprising about a third of the sample with a low rate of sexual reconviction;
- a high risk group comprising about a quarter of the sample of whom nearly half are reconvicted for sex offences; and,
- a middle group of about half the sample amongst whom a quarter are reconvicted.

As screening tools, both the RRASOR and the SACJ systems clearly have great potential. Each is capable of distinguishing sex offenders who are of high and of low risk of being reconvicted. There remains the issue, of course, of the correspondence between reconviction and re-offending rates – clearly, if low reconviction groups are made of men who reoffend but are simply not caught, then the exercise achieves little. If this were the case, however, then one would have to infer that the risk factors used in the scales were in fact not good predictors of re-offending, but of the ability to avoid detection, an unlikely conclusion.

More work is needed, however, in three areas.

- First, it is not clear whether either system is able to distinguish frequency of re-offending from severity, as the type of re-offences are not specified in their results.
- Second, both systems identify a middle group comprising a sizeable number of offenders with a moderate reconviction rate of between 20 and 25%. It remains to be seen whether either of these tools can be refined to identify higher risk men in this middle group. It may be, as Hanson in fact suggests, that more specialised assessments will be needed if one is to refine the screening process further, although utilising information from all three steps of SACJ might be able to achieve this.
- Finally, neither instrument is likely to do well with respect to individuals who have committed their first sexual offence, but identifying which of these offenders is likely to go on to commit further sexual offences is of some importance.

Neither Hanson nor Thornton believe these are stand alone instruments, however, and it is in these areas that individual assessment and police or prison intelligence information may be able to increase overall predictive accuracy.

Prediction of offending

Because prediction of sexual re-offending is so heavily dependent on a history of previous offending, it is difficult to identify in a robust manner individuals who may be potential abusers of children but who are not known to have sexually abused children in the past. This is particularly relevant, for example, in attempts to develop screening tools that employers might use when recruiting staff that would be able to withstand challenge by those who screened positive.

As a method of screening, it is possible to measure sexual arousal to children, with the penile plethysmograph. More practically from a community point of view more subtle techniques, based on the length of gaze (recorded in milliseconds) in respect of relevant pictures of children, or other psychometric tests could be used. Similarly, one could develop screens generalised from risk factors in known offenders; for example, cognitive distortions about childhood sexuality, characteristics like emotional loneliness and empathy, or other non-offending measures such as those found in step two of the SACJ described above. The difficulty will be in demonstrating that the resulting profiles do in fact identify a higher risk group. In relation to sexual violence towards women, Malamuth et al. (1991) were able to show that a number of characteristics present in American university students predicted sexual aggression 10 years later in the context of *normal* relationships, based on interviews with sexual partners. It is hard to see, however, how a similar study could be carried out in relation to child sexual abuse.

Of course, it may be that for certain professions in which there is close contact with children definitive evidence of risk is not necessary, and a lower threshold to screen out potential employees would be acceptable. Before such a step could be taken, however, it would be necessary to ensure that the evidence on which this threshold was set was at least sound, if not definitive.

Treatment

It is well beyond the scope of this work to comment on sex offender treatment outcome in any detail. It is fair to say, however, that the literature is not wholly consistent. Furby et al. (1989) published a review suggesting that, in spite of the poverty of well designed studies at the time that should have limited comments on treatment efficacy, there was no evidence that treatment was able to reduce sex offender recidivism. Many of the programmes reviewed by Furby et al., however, were indeed of poor quality, and were often based on principles now known not to be effective.

Since the Furby et al. (1989) review, there has been a gradual accumulation of evidence on treatment effectiveness. Well designed programmes aimed at higher risk men, which are targeted at changing thoughts and behaviours known to contribute to offending, where treatment integrity is monitored, and where extended aftercare is provided, can reduce the risk of sexual re-offending (Marshall et al., 1991; Marques et al., 1994; Nagayama Hall, 1995). Currently, the effectiveness of the prison Sex Offender Treatment Programme is being closely monitored, as are a number of community programmes in England as part of STEP (the Sex Offender Treatment Evaluation Project). Their preliminary results suggest

that treatment has at least a short term impact on those factors believed to be associated with offending, and this appears to be related to a reduction in reconviction rates (Hedderman and Sugg, 1996).

Even those most optimistic about treatment, however, recognise that the benefits may never be dramatic. Nagayama Hall (1995), for example, in a meta-analysis of a small number of treatment programmes, reported that treatment appeared to reduce recidivism by about a third (from 27% to 19%). Men in the high risk groups identified by the RRASOR and SACJ instruments reoffend at rates of 40 to 75%. Even cutting this rate by a third will mean that a quarter to a half of high risk offenders will be “treatment failures” (although there may still be a reduction in the frequency or severity of their re-offending). Cutting it in half still leaves a re-offending rate of 20 to 33%.

It remains uncertain, however, just how effective modern treatment will prove to be, and given the difficulty of mounting controlled experimental trials in this area, interpretation of the results of treatment will always be problematic. Nevertheless, it is now fairly clear that the global pessimism expressed by Furby et al. in 1989 about the efficacy of treatment was overstated. On the other hand, treatment of sex offenders on its own will not solve the problem of sexual re-offending.

5. The management of sex offenders against children: prevention versus harm reduction

Sex offending is not a disease, and it does not lend itself to a cure. Regardless of the management systems and treatment programmes that are in place to deal with those who have sexually offended against children, it is simply not possible to prevent all high risk individuals from sexually re-offending. One can, however, lower the risk of such re-offending significantly in some individuals, and decrease the frequency of offending in others, in both cases reducing the number of future victims. Explicit recognition of this is sometimes referred to as “harm reduction”, a model popular in the treatment of alcohol and drug addictions but only recently applied to sex offending (Laws, 1996).

In brief, “harm reduction” is based on public health principles that any change from a damaging to a less damaging behaviour pattern is a change for the better. For example, although the smoking of heroin is not an ideal goal, if one can move a heroin addict from injecting the drug to smoking it one has made some progress, given the greater risks associated with intravenous drug use. Similarly, a further move from daily addictive use to weekly recreational use will decrease the damage he is causing to his health, even though one is still some way away from the ultimate goal of drug abstinence.

The alternative to harm reduction, absolute prevention, can realistically be achieved only through indeterminate detention, which is itself not without its problems. Thresholds will still need to be drawn below which some sex offenders will be released into the community, while those indefinitely detained will presumably require repeated assessments of their dangerousness which will need to be carried out systematically if they are not to be open to challenge. In the United States, preventative detention in the guise of Sexual Psychopath Laws usually took place in hospitals on the principle that indefinite incarceration could only be justified if something was being done to lessen an individual’s dangerousness, and hence provide the potential for release (Grubin and Prentky, 1993). But as there was nothing to “cure”, and usually no clear symptoms to reduce, it was impossible to predict with accuracy the future behaviour of individuals in this context. Hospitals were often placed in difficult positions, unable to guarantee that those patients who appeared to respond to treatment would not reoffend some time in the future, and having to function as prisons in respect of those individuals who were resistant to treatment.

Unless society is prepared simply to lock up for many years all those convicted of sexual offences, decisions are going to have to be made about returning these individuals to the community, about the amount of risk that will be tolerated, and

the most effective way of managing that risk. It is unlikely that there will ever be the massive inflow of resources required to manage intensively all sex offenders, and it will thus be necessary to focus on higher risk groups. To do so, however, is to accept that there will be individuals in lower risk groups who will reoffend. At the same time, one can never be certain that higher risk individuals who do *not* reoffend were prevented from doing so by the way in which they were managed.

In order to manage sex offenders most effectively in the community, there must be active co-operation between police, prison, probation, health and social services. To monitor the effectiveness of this co-operation more details are needed about sex offending patterns on a regional level, and management strategies must be evaluated. From the point of view of the police, there needs to be a consistent national strategy of how sex offenders of all levels of risk are to be managed.

The likelihood of a sex offender re-offending will vary over time, depending on his mental state, social circumstances, and general well being; many benefit from knowing there are explicit external controls around them. There will therefore need to be ongoing reassessment of risk, visible monitoring, and appropriate intervention at times of increased risk – those involved in the management of sex offenders will need to know how to evaluate risk and how to intervene to reduce it. At times this may involve treatment, at times social support, and at times community notification. The science, and the art, is in knowing when to do which.

6. Conclusion

This review has identified the following key points about sex offending against children:

- Judging by the numbers of cases reported to the police, sex offending against children may be even more prevalent than population surveys have indicated previously;
- The majority of offenders offend in the home and abuse children who are members of their family or who are known to them;
- The consequences of being abused in the home by a known and trusted adult are often more serious than being abused by a stranger;
- Adolescent offenders probably account for up to a third of all sex crime. Multi-agency work needs to identify and treat those young offenders (and their victims) who are most at risk of continuing to offend;
- About 20% of those who are convicted of sexual offences against children are reconvicted for similar offences; the RRASOR and SACJ risk assessment instruments can be used to identify offenders who represent a higher risk of re-offending;
- Multi-agency work is needed to achieve the goal of managing the risk of sex offenders in the community.

By its nature, sexual offending against children does not thrive in the light. In spite of this, we actually know a great deal about the men who sexually abuse children, and the ways in which they carry it out. There are risks, however, in focusing too intensely on those offenders who have come into the system, either through convictions or through social service mechanisms. By this time, victims have been created, and at best further prevention is secondary to the damage that has already been caused. In any case, these known offenders represent only the minority on whom the light has fallen.

If the problem of child sexual abuse is to be addressed effectively, attention may need to shift to the much larger canvas of primary prevention. For example, there is some evidence to show that the lessons of good school programmes designed to instruct children (and parents) about how to avoid sexual abuse, and to encourage them to report it when it happens, can be put into practice by children (Finkelhor et al., 1995). More generally, organisations that deal with children, such as schools,

sports teams, religious orders, clubs and the like, must be confident of their procedures for vetting adults who work for them. Children need to be educated on how to respond to adults who seek to abuse them, and on what they should do if friends tell them “secrets” about abuse they are experiencing. Potential abusers themselves should be able to obtain help before they offend, or in the early stages of their offending. There is no reason at all why the police should not be fundamental contributors to these types of preventative programmes.

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